



Where You're At

No. 10
Series: Colossians

Colossians 3:18-4:1

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Text

[18] Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. [19] Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. [20] Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. [21] Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. [22] Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. [23] Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, [24] knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. [25] For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

[1] Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

Introduction

- Arouse Interest:
 - In 2010 David Platt published a book called *Radical*. It's a good book trying to wake Christians up to the radical call of Christian discipleship. Platt was advocating for a more conscientious counter cultural life, with intentional sacrifices for missions. He wanted to make sure Christians didn't conflate the Christian life with the American dream.¹
 - But then in 2014, Michael Horton released another book. It wasn't necessarily intended as a response to Platt's book. But it was given a very similar orange cover. Horton's book is called *Ordinary Sustainable Faith in a Radical Restless World*.²
 - I would commend both books as worthy of your consideration. But during college as a young man with great ambitions, I found Horton's book very convicting.
- Surface Need
 - Horton asked, What if faithfulness to God looked a whole lot more ordinary than we think? What if instead of calling us to die on the mission field, God's call on your life was to live and work a 9 to 5 job loving people well and pointing the people you work with to Christ?

¹ David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream*, 1st ed. (Colorado Springs, Colo: Multnomah Books, 2010).

² Michael Scott Horton, *Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World*, ePub Edition. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2014).

- Now Horton isn't saying that no one is called to give up their life and follow Christ to the mission field. It's very possible that some of you today are being called to follow Christ in a remarkable way. And if you feel like the Lord is calling you to do something like this, you should talk to your pastors and your spiritual family here. That's something we would want to discern with you.
 - But at the same time, we should take another look at the letters of Paul again and see what exactly he asks Christians to do in light of their new life in Jesus Christ.
- Orient to the Text:
 - As we recall Paul has been writing about the supremacy of Christ over all other spiritual traditions and practices. He's attempting to protect the church in Colossae from both the Jewish system of law and from Gentile practices of spiritual asceticism.
 - According to Paul, these practices have an appearance of wisdom, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh (2:23). Instead Paul argues that Christians ought to cling to Christ and seek the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God (3:1). And as we await the renewal of all creation in Christ, Paul argues that Christians today in whatever we do we ought to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (3:17).
 - So rather than call God's people out of the world, out of their family and work. Paul actually asks Christians today to reengage with their life here on earth with our eyes set on heaven.
 - In one sense, what Paul actually asks Christians to do is actually kind of ordinary. Love your family. Work hard at your job.
 - But the way Paul asks us to engage in the mundane tasks of the day is quite extraordinary. According to Paul, ***Christians serve God best when they serve him where he's called them.***
 - Organizational sentence:
 - The structure of our passage this morning is pretty clear. Here Paul sets out three different sets of relationships where Christians can serve the Lord. Wives and Husbands (18-19), Children and Parents (20-21), and Servants and Masters (22-4:1). In each of these sets, the one who is called to submit is addressed first while the one who has authority is addressed second.

Wives and Husbands (18-19)

- Let's look at this first set of relationships here in verses 18 and 19.
 - [18] Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. [19] Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.

- Now before we jump into the controversial stuff, let me point out a couple of things to keep in mind. Generally, household codes like these are pretty typical in the Greco Roman world. Both Plato and Aristotle talk about the right ordering of the home including these three dimensions: the wife, the kids, and the servants.
- But Paul's household codes here are unique. Normally, it is only the man of the house who is addressed in these codes. And the only things that are said are how the man can get his wife, children, and servants to get in line.
- But Paul addresses everyone in the household, and he validates everyone's role. Here in our text, it's not just the men who are competent to serve God. No, in God's kingdom the wife, the child, and the servant matter to God. And their work is to be seen as meaningful spiritual service to the most high God.
 - This is just a simple reminder to all of us today, it's not just the pastor who is called to serve the Lord. Whoever you are, whatever your primary vocation is today, whether you're a student, a salesman, or a stay at home mom, you matter to God. And as we will see, the work you do is pleasing to God. It is meaningful labor in his kingdom.
- This leads to the second important change that Paul makes to the household code. He doesn't say that the husband or father is the Lord of the house. According to Paul, in a Christian house, Christ is the Lord of the house. And everyone, even the husband and father, is in submission to Jesus. You can see this in 4:1:
 - [1] Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.
- That's a radical shift in mindset. That whole framework of elevating the least of these while humbling the so-called head of the house is radically counter-cultural within a Greco-Roman world.
- But I know what some of you are thinking. If Paul had such a radically distinct vision, if he really thought the Gospel validated the lives of the least of these in society, why does he still ask wives to submit to their husbands?
- Well maybe this isn't really a universal standard for all people at all times?
- This is a common tactic some Bible scholars use to approach texts like these. Just as we don't ask women today to wear a head covering when they pray, or to avoid different kinds of shellfish, so also maybe this is a command Paul gave for the Colossian church at that time.
- Maybe Paul was upholding the patriarchal norms of the day so that Christians wouldn't be unnecessarily persecuted. Maybe this was just a way for them then to evangelize to the culture around them. Maybe it doesn't need to be this way for us today.
- Now that's a plausible argument. But how would we test it? How could we find out if this command really is just an accommodation to culture?

- I would argue that we can test whether or not a command is a cultural accommodation by looking at how other biblical writers approach the issue in other times and contexts.
- When we look at passages on the topic of marriage, we realize that this is just the universal teaching of the Bible. Every passage in the New Testament that deals with the relationship of the wife to her husband calls her to “submit to” her husband.
- You can see this in Ephesians 5:22; Colossians 3:18; 1 Peter 3:1; and Titus 2:4.
- Furthermore, while some of these passages are motivated by being a good witness to unbelievers, that isn’t the only motivation.
 - In Ephesians 5:31 Paul commands women to submit to their husbands because this is the pattern of marriage God set up in Genesis 1 and 2.
 - Not only is this pattern rooted in creation, but in Ephesians 5:22, Paul also grounds this pattern in Christ's work of redemption as well. For Paul, marriage is designed by God to be a small picture of how Christ relates to his church. Just as the church is to submit to Christ so also are wives to submit to their husbands. Just as Christ laid down his life in love for the church so also are husbands to sacrificial love their wives.
- So I don’t think you can chalk this up to just cultural accommodation. It seems to just be rooted in how God designed marriage to work.

Application

- Now I know for sure that some of you have strong feelings about this, but I’m just asking you to try to hear me out here. As Christians we believe that the Bible is Jesus’ words to his people, and Jesus loves us more than you or I could ever imagine. He loved us enough to die for us even when we were in rebellion against him. And if this is really what Jesus is asking of us, then we should do our best to understand why he’s asking this of us. We should trust that even if we don’t fully understand, Jesus for sure has our best interest at heart.
- So what does the Bible, what does Jesus have to say about gender roles? Well according to Genesis 1 and 2, gender is not a social construct. In Gen. 1:27-28, God is said to have created both men and women in his image. Both men and women are given equal value and dignity. One is not ontologically subordinate to the other.
- At the same time, God’s original intention for humanity is that we would be distinctly gendered as male and female. And in Genesis 2, God gives different roles to both men and women. Adam is called to work and keep the garden (Gen. 2:15) and Eve is called to be a helper to Adam (Gen. 2:18). Now these gender roles get corrupted in Genesis 3, but the logic of Colossians is that because Christ is reconciling all of creation back to himself, he is at work in Christian marriages restoring his original design for them.
- Now what does this mean for us today? Women, I don’t think God is calling you to submit to every man. This is a specific text calling wives to submit to their husbands.

- Wives, I don't think this means you need to submit to your husbands when they are being abusive to you. If your husband is abusing you, you should call the police and call your pastor. That is the right thing to do. I also don't think this means that you are supposed to be a simple puppet to your husband's will. It's important for you to give feedback and talk through decisions together as a couple. That's part of what it means for you to be his helper. In a sense you are his right hand girl.
- However, I do think that if you are a married wife today, the biblical expectation is that sometimes you will need to follow your husband's lead even though at times you don't really want to.
- And sometimes that can be hard. This is why for single women in the church, I think one of the applications you should take away from this is that in dating, you should look for a godly man you would be proud to follow.
- At the same time if you are in a hard marriage, there's a promise that the Lord gives to wives as they seek to be faithful here. First the Lord promises that he sees you and your service is valuable to him. Even if no one else gives you the recognition you deserve, God recognizes you. And he's storing up treasures in heaven for your faithfulness here on earth.
- Second, in your faithfulness to your husbands, sometimes the Lord uses your Gospel character to sanctify your husband. To help them become the kind of servant leaders you yourself would actually want to follow. 1 Peter 3:1 states:
 - [1] Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives.
- Husbands, verses like these don't mean that you can force your wife to do whatever you want. And wives, if your husband is trying to force you to submit to him through fear or manipulation, you should probably come talk to the pastors here in the church.
- If we're being fair with the Bible, there really isn't anything in Scripture about the husband forcing his wife to do anything. Rather the biblical picture of your leadership is that you love your wife so sacrificially, in such a Christlike manner, that you actually earn her trust in your character and love.
- Just as it's not a burden for Christian to submit to Christ because we know he loves us enough to die for us, so also in a smaller way it shouldn't be a burden for a wife to listen to her husband when she knows that he loves her more than himself.
- That's the biblical picture of marriage. And to be honest, the more I look at how the world is handling dating and relationships, the more confident I grow in believing that God knew what he was doing when he designed marriage to work this way.
- I realize that some of this sounds a little antiquated and out of touch with the modern world. But at the same time, I do kind of think there were some things that men and women just did better back in their day.

- While I believe that certain aspects of feminism is good in correcting the abuses of a previous generation, I think a radical feminism that seeks to obliterate any kind of gender distinctions between men and women is simply working against the way God has designed us.
- Similarly, while I don't want the men in our church to be misogynistic chauvinists, I do want the men here to be chivalrous. To aim to be knights in shining armor. To hold the door, and walk the lady to her car when it's dark outside.
- I know that gender roles won't look the same today in our time and culture. But I think we should still respect the traditional gender roles of the past. I think we should lean into the different strengths and callings God has given us by virtue of how he's designed us to be.

Children and Parents (20-21)

- Well that's how God designed the Gospel to be displayed in marriage. But what about the relationship of children to their parents?
- Paul addresses this relationship starting in verse 21.
 - [20] Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.
- Again, I need to emphasize here how remarkable it is that Paul is even addressing children directly here in the first place. Normally in this society children were often overlooked or taken for granted.
- But Paul believed that children mattered to the Lord. That Christian children had a special calling and vocation within the kingdom of God.

Application

- For the kids here today, you need to know that part of what it means to be a Christian is that you be faithful in your calling to listen and obey your parents.
- That part of what it means to be Christlike is to follow Christ's example when he is said to be obedient to his parents in Luke 2:51. Jesus had such respect for his parents that even on the cross as he is dying for the sins of his people in John 19:25-29, he was still concerned to ensure someone was there to be able to take care of his mother Mary. And that's a convicting thing for those of us to think about who've moved out of our childhood home.
- Now kids, you may not like all the rules that your parents have given you, but part of what it will mean for you to trust in God is to trust that God knew what he was doing when he paired you with your parents and entrusted you to their care.
- You'll figure this out when you get older, but there's never really a time in your life when you're totally free from all authority. In life you have bosses and leaders and governments constantly telling you to do things that you don't want to do.
- And if you have a hard time obeying your parents who know you and love you, you may have a hard time in life obeying those in authority over you who don't really care about you.
- At the same time, Paul balances his statement here by also addressing parents and in particular Fathers in verse 21.

- [21] Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.
- This is something that every parent needs to be constantly reminded of. No matter how bad your kids are in their terrible 2s or terrifying teens, the fact of the matter is that God entrusted you with great stewardship when he gave you kids. You and I have 18 years to ensure that we do our best to give our kids all the tools they need to flourish and thrive in their adult years. And that's a high calling.
 - You should also know that as their mom and dad, you probably mean a whole lot more to your kids than you know. You mean more to them than they probably know themselves. And right now, you have the greatest potential to both help and hurt your kids.
 - Parenting is an impossible job. It requires us to on the one hand ensure that our kids not only know what's right and wrong but to do our best to instill these values deep within their hearts. To cultivate in them a love for the good and a disgust for sin.
 - On the other hand, parenting also requires that we take care not to crush our kids with unreasonable expectations or demands. If you are a Christian parent here today, you and I need to realize that we are the first introduction our kids will have to proper discipline as well as true mercy.
 - And that's a hard balance to strike. But if we fail to get both of these things right, it is likely that our kids will also grow up with a skewed perspective of God's fatherly discipline and love as well. And that's a scary thing to think about.
 - That's why we constantly need to pray for ourselves and our kids. And for those of you without kids, this is one way that you can be praying for the parents in your church this week. You can also help by taking the initiative to help disciple some of these kids yourself as well.
 - But fundamentally we all need to pray that we will not discourage our kids in our discipleship of them. Pray that in our parenting we will be a faithful reflection of the fatherly love of God to his people. And pray that the Lord makes up the difference in the ways that we fall short.
 - And if you are an unbeliever here today who finds the whole notion of marriage and children to be antiquated and ridiculous, can I just challenge you today to do one thing for me? Have dinner at one of our homes. Come and have an up close look at how beautiful God's design for the family can really be. We don't always do things perfectly. But there's a way that the family displays the unconditional love of God that is unique. And my hope and prayer is that when you see it, you'll feel woefully unsatisfied with the things of this world.
 - For those of you who are Christians but don't have a family of your own, I know this sermon is really tilted in one direction. But I would actually give you similar advice. Whether the Lord has marriage and kids in your future or not, all of us still need to learn how to be good spiritual moms and dads to the kids in our church. And the only way you can learn is by being around other Christian moms and dads. Parents, invite single people into your home. They need your love and friendship. And you'll be surprised how much you yourself will be disciplined by their influence.

Masters and Servants (3:22-4:1)

- So we've looked at how Christians can serve God in their marriage and in their relationship to their families. But now we're going to look at how Christians can honor God in the workforce.
- And this one is a little tricky. Let me say just upfront, I don't believe verses 3:21-4:1 endorse our modern day conception of slavery.
- First of all, you can't draw a one to one correlation to the slavery that Paul is referring to and the slavery that we think of when we think about the race based chattel slavery of America. Slavery in the Greco-Roman world wasn't race based. And although some slaves were abused and treated poorly, some slaves did have rights and some measure of status in their society.
- Secondly, the Greek word used for slave here (δοῦλος) actually has a range of meanings. A helpful resource to read on this topic is the preface to our ESV Bibles. There the translation philosophy of the ESV Bible is laid out, and there is a paragraph there that specifically deals with the translation of this word (δοῦλος).
- According to the translators, some (δοῦλος) are better understood as bondservants or contract workers who contracted their labor for seven years, and the translators are very intentional when they choose to translate the word as either slave or bondservant. And here they think that what Paul is talking about is really more like a contract worker.
- Now I want to be fair here. It is also possible that Paul is just addressing slaves here. People who are laboring against their will and who do not have the freedom to get out of their servitude. It's possible. But the term is flexible, and we can't be too sure about this.
- What we know for sure is that Paul's other writings and the larger picture of the Bible does seem to paint slavery as a human evil. It may have been an evil that Christians needed to live with for the time being, but it was an evil that was for sure going to be stopped by God eventually.
 - In Philemon, Paul puts a lot of pressure on Philemon to release Onesimus from slavery. Although he doesn't command, he does have his letter read aloud to the whole church asking that Philemon release Onesimus.
 - In Revelation 18, part of the reason God brings down the empire of Babylon is because they were kidnapping and selling slaves (Rev. 18:18)
- So even though Christians didn't immediately work to abolish slavery, I would argue that the values of the Bible were instrumental in bringing the abolition of slavery eventually. And if you want to talk about this more, I'd be happy to meet with you after the service and recommend some resources.

Application

- But whether (δοῦλος) is better translated here as servant or slave. I think the modern day application to Christians today is still the same.

- If Paul was willing to ask them in their condition to do their jobs as unto the Lord, then surely you and I today ought to strive to do our jobs to the very best of our abilities as well.
- Paul writes in verse 22:
 - [22] Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. [23] Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, [24] knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. [25] For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality

Illustration

- And this is hard to do isn't it? I remember some of the jobs I used to work. I used to bus tables and work as a handy man assistant. For a little while I was a landscaper and a snow shoveler. And there were times in these kinds of jobs where I would kinda slack off. It didn't feel that important. I wanted to do great things for Jesus, not wash dishes.
- But there was something I was clearly missing. Something that Paul here is clearly trying to get the Christians in Colossae to understand. According to Paul, Christians serve God best, when they serve him right where they're at. And we really need to think about how that is true.

Application

- When you work hard at a mundane job, automatically, especially in our world, you are being a witness to Jesus Christ. You stand out in a good way, when you go the extra mile when no one is looking. And when people ask about it, you can say, I work hard not to please my boss but to please my king. That's an opportunity for you to share the Gospel with others around you.
- Not only is your job a way for you to be a good witness in the workforce, but when we think about the providential provision of the Lord, we realize that whatever we are doing, it is being used by God to provide for the people of this world. To care for those God cares for. Tim Keller used to talk about this. When God provides for you your daily bread, how did he provide it? Well he used the baker down the road to bake the bread. But he also used the farmer to harvest the grains. And he also used the oven maker to build the oven. And he used the government to protect the markets so that you could buy the bread.³
- And you can go on and on connecting the dots here. And when you do that, you realize real quick there is no such thing as an unimportant job. Just because you can't see the importance of your work doesn't mean that God can't see it. Steven is going to talk more about this during our luncheon today when he talks about Keller's book on work.
- But the bottom line is just this: wherever you're at, whoever you are working for, God asks us to do our work for him.

³ Timothy Keller and Katherine Leary Alsdorf, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work*, Redeemer (New York: Dutton, 2012).

- Friends, are you serving God where God has placed you today? I know many of us have ambitions of greatness. We want to do amazing things for God in various places all over the world. I don't want to squash the dreams God himself may have placed on your heart. But I just want to temper our ambitions just a little bit. If we are not faithful with the little things that God has placed in front of us today, what makes you think that we can handle the greater responsibilities ahead?
- Similarly, if God has given you a particular stewardship over certain people in your charge, how are you managing them? Are they simply cogs in a greater entrepreneurial machine, useful but dispensable?
- According to Paul, Christian masters are supposed to give those in their charge justice and equity for we also have a master in heaven. And God is not pleased when we cut wages or fire people just to save a few pennies on a pension plan.
- Another way we can apply this text is to ask ourselves how we treat the least of these in our society today? How do you treat the cashier at McDonalds or the street sweeper working outside? Do you thank them for their services? You should. You realize that these people are part of God's providential provision to care for you and your family right? That if all these people disappeared tomorrow, this whole city would be in a huge mess.
- One day Christ our master himself will return to establish his kingdom on earth. And you and I will need to give an account to him for the work he entrusted in our hands. And when Christ evaluates the service of his people, he doesn't just base it on simple pragmatic results. No he judges the faithfulness of his saints. Did you truly go about your work as if it were a service to him? As if it were done for Jesus himself?
- The famous missionary Charles Thomas Studd used to say, "Only one life will soon be passed. Only what's done for Christ will last."